

James M. Buchanan and the Political Economy of Desegregation

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Abstract

Were 1986 Nobel Laureate James M. Buchanan's formative contributions to political economy inspired in significant part by hostility to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision? Nancy MacLean's 2017 *Democracy in Chains* argues that public choice economics emerged from an opportunistic alliance with Virginia's "Massive Resistance" to school integration and should thus be situated within the racially tinged tradition of southern conservatism. While Buchanan wrote very little on the economics of race, archival evidence and his published works do not support this thesis. Buchanan's work is better understood with reference to his Chicago school mentor Frank Knight and the Italian public finance tradition rather than southern conservatism. To the contrary, we suggest Buchanan believed the competitive processes generated by an educational voucher system would likely undermine rather than rescue the racially segregated status quo. Furthermore, Buchanan's associations and activities suggest that racial hierarchy was not part of his normative vision.

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